

Co-Teaching Evolved: From Placement to Partnership

A BLUEPRINT FOR INCLUSIVE, HIGH-IMPACT
CO-TEACHING IN MODERN CLASSROOMS



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Solution Tree



LET'S SEE WHAT **WE CAN** DO TOGETHER



The question is not whether two adults are in the room. The question is whether their partnership gives every student more access, feedback, and opportunity to learn.

—CO-TEACHING EVOLVED



Classrooms are more diverse and complex than ever, requiring an equitable instructional architecture that gives all students access to high-impact learning. Co-teaching succeeds when two educators move beyond simple co-existence to systematically plan, deliver, assess, and reflect together.

Key takeaways

- Why co-teaching must evolve from a scheduling solution into a professional practice
- How to navigate the eleven co-teaching strategies across every stage
- The key foundations that drive high-impact co-teaching
- Essential agreements and systemic leadership moves that sustain a co-teaching culture

The call for modern co-teaching

Classrooms in the 21st century look markedly different than they did even a decade ago. They are more inclusive, more diverse, and more complex. Students with individualized education programs (IEPs) learn alongside English learners, gifted students, and students recovering from pandemic-related learning loss—all within the same four walls, or increasingly within digital spaces that extend those walls entirely. Teachers must provide students with an equitable, inclusive environment in which to learn the content and skills they need to become resilient, flexible, lifelong learners ready to navigate an ever-changing world (Rhoads & Karge, 2025).

Against this backdrop, co-teaching stands out not as a program or a compliance mechanism but as a sustainable instructional architecture. Research consistently shows that co-teaching leads to higher levels of student academic achievement and teacher efficacy (Hill, 2020; Hoover, 2007; Karge, 2023; Little & Theker, 2009; Murawski & Lochner, 2018; Murawski & Spencer, 2011; Villa, Thousand, & Nevin, 2013). It also correlates with stronger teacher

retention—an increasingly critical concern for district leaders (Donohoo, Hattie, & Eells, 2018). When co-teaching works, it does not simply place two adults in a classroom; it creates an instructional engine.

Yet co-teaching often falls short of its promise. In many schools, it exists in name only: One teacher leads while the other circulates without purpose, and the partnership never deepens into genuine collaboration. Districts invest in co-teaching models without investing in the professional learning, planning time, or essential agreements that allow those models to succeed. The result is what researchers describe as coexistence rather than co-teaching—a common outcome when implementation is treated as a scheduling solution rather than a professional practice (Friend & Barron, 2016).

Co-Teaching Evolved (Rhoads & Karge, 2025) argues that co-teaching must be reimagined to meet the demands of modern classrooms. That reimagining begins with a clear-eyed understanding of what co-teaching is, what it requires, and what it can achieve when done well.





Co-teaching is not possible without the willingness to change and the sharing of responsibility.

—E. CARRILLO / CO-TEACHING RESEARCHER AND EDUCATION SPECIALIST

Defining co-teaching for the modern classroom

Co-teaching describes a situation in which two educators collectively plan, organize, deliver, assess, and reflect on instruction (Friend & Barron, 2016). In this definition, every verb matters. Planning is shared. Delivery is shared. Assessment is shared. Reflection is shared. When any of these elements belong solely to one partner, co-teaching slips into something else—something closer to assisted teaching, which produces far fewer benefits for students or teachers.

Rhoads and Karge (2024) extend this definition to encompass the full range of professionals who can

participate in co-teaching partnerships: credentialed teachers, special education teachers, bilingual educators, speech-language pathologists, occupational therapists, and paraprofessionals. Each brings a different lens to the shared classroom, and each partnership type creates its own opportunities and challenges. What unifies all effective co-teaching partnerships, regardless of configuration, is a commitment to shared responsibility, mutual respect, and continuous reflection.



The three pillars of evolved co-teaching

Co-Teaching Evolved organizes its approach around three foundational pillars that run throughout the book and every co-teaching strategy it presents:

- **Equity and inclusion:** Every student in a co-taught classroom is “our student”—not a general education student or a special education student, but a shared responsibility. Effective co-teaching ensures that all students have access to rigorous grade-level instruction, meaningful participation, and responsive support. Inclusion is not a placement; it is a daily instructional commitment.
- **Research-Based instructional practice:** Co-teaching gains its power when co-teachers bring deliberate instructional strategies to

the work—strategies grounded in cognitive science, Universal Design for Learning (UDL), and the Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPACK) framework (Koehler & Mishra, 2009).

- **Technology and AI integration:** Modern co-teaching classrooms extend beyond physical walls. Co-teachers who understand how to integrate educational technology tools and, increasingly, generative AI as a planning copilot create richer, more differentiated, and more sustainable instructional experiences. This does not replace the human partnership at the center of co-teaching—it amplifies it.



The eleven co-teaching strategies: **A pathway, not a menu**

Lynn Cook and Marilyn Friend (1995) originally introduced six co-teaching strategies for general and special education partnerships. Since then, the research base has expanded, the contexts have diversified, and the demands on co-teaching classrooms have grown dramatically. *Co-Teaching Evolved* presents eleven research-aligned strategies organized into three stages—supportive, team, and advanced—and frames them explicitly as a developmental progression, not a static menu of equal options (Karge, 2023).

The staging matters. Co-teaching teams that begin their work together in the supportive stage build the trust, routines, and shared understanding they need to move into team and advanced strategies effectively. Teams that try to jump immediately to advanced strategies—or that remain permanently in supportive strategies—miss the point. Rhoads and Karge (2024) caution that teams who never move past the first stage often develop resentment as workloads remain imbalanced. The goal is deliberate progression, with coaching and reflection built into each transition.



STAGE	STRATEGY	WHAT STUDENTS EXPERIENCE
SUPPORTIVE	1. One teach, one assist	A clear lead lesson with immediate individual help, redirection, or access support for students who need it.
SUPPORTIVE	2. One teach, one observe	Focused observation and systematic data collection on learning, behavior, language use, or engagement to inform future instruction.
SUPPORTIVE	3. One teach, one support	Enhanced instruction through parallel note-taking, visual reinforcement, checks for understanding, and strategic paraphrasing.
TEAM	4. Graze-and-tag teaching	Teachers shift the lead fluidly, with one monitoring student thinking and tagging in with questions, mini-models, or timely examples.
TEAM	5. Parallel teaching	The class divides into two simultaneous groups, each receiving the same lesson with significantly more opportunities to respond and practice.
TEAM	6. Station teaching	Students rotate through teacher-led and independent stations that chunk complex content into manageable practice with targeted feedback.
TEAM	7. Alternative teaching	A targeted small group receives reteaching, pre-teaching, or intensive formative assessment while others continue with grade-level content.
ADVANCED	8. Conversation teaching	Students observe co-teachers modeling expert academic dialogue, inquiry, and disciplinary reasoning—making both educators’ thinking visible.
ADVANCED	9. Role-play teaching	Co-teachers use structured skits, academic debates, or collaborative think-alouds to make abstract concepts concrete and memorable.
ADVANCED	10. Interactive teaching	Both co-teachers share the instructional lead across all phases: modeling, discussion, guided practice, and feedback in a fully integrated partnership (Villa, Thousand, & Nevin, 2013).
ADVANCED	11. Shared teaching	Co-teachers fully share ownership of every classroom element: planning, teaching, assessing, reflecting, and classroom culture (Murawski & Spencer, 2011).

The eleven strategies give co-teachers a shared language for their work. Without that language, conversations about instruction remain vague and abstract. With it, co-teachers can plan with precision: “Tomorrow we open with graze-and-tag teaching during the vocabulary introduction, shift to parallel

teaching for reading practice, and close with alternative teaching while I pull students who scored below 70% on yesterday’s exit ticket.” That specificity is what separates co-teaching as a high-impact practice from co-teaching as a scheduling convenience.

Building the partnership that makes strategies work

Strategies are only as powerful as the partnership that implements them. This is the most underappreciated truth about co-teaching, and it is a central theme of *Co-Teaching Evolved*. The research is clear: Teachers who work together positively demonstrate higher levels of collective efficacy (Goddard, Skrla, & Salloum, 2017), and students in classrooms with strong teacher-student relationships achieve significantly greater academic gains (Roorda, Koomen, Spilt, & Oort, 2011). The co-teaching partnership is not a background condition—it is a key variable in student outcomes.

Building a strong co-teaching relationship requires intentional work across several dimensions. Drawing on input from more than 150 co-teaching teams across grade levels and settings worldwide, Rhoads and Karge (2024) identify fourteen practices that underpin successful partnerships. These range from the foundational—building a genuine professional relationship, starting small with supportive strategies, and establishing collaborative planning routines—to the more nuanced: letting go of individual classroom control, using each other’s strengths strategically, and taking structured time to debrief both lessons and the relationship itself.



Essential agreements: the backbone of the partnership

Among the most powerful practices in *Co-Teaching Evolved* is developing essential agreements: explicit, collaboratively created understandings about how the partnership will function. These agreements address the questions co-teachers most often leave unanswered until conflict arises—questions about grading philosophy, classroom management routines, how IEP accommodations will be implemented, communication with families, and how the partnership will resolve disagreements when they arise.

Essential agreements transform implicit expectations into shared commitments. When co-teachers have them, day-to-day teaching runs more smoothly, conflicts are resolved more quickly, and the partnership is more likely to sustain itself across multiple school years. Without them, every disagreement must be

resolved from scratch, often in front of students or in the middle of a lesson—and over time, unresolved tensions erode the relationship entirely (Jenkins & Murawski, 2024).

Research linking co-teacher relationships to student outcomes is not abstract. In a case study described in *Co-Teaching Evolved*, a district that imposed co-teaching without planning time, professional learning, or partnership agreements faced a union grievance within two years. After engaging an expert to redesign implementation—centering relationship-building and essential agreements from the start—the district saw a measurable increase in teacher requests to co-teach and a significant rise in student assessment scores. The difference was not a new strategy. It was a foundation.



Student outcomes in co-taught classes are strongly impacted by the amount that the teaching partners invest and believe in co-teaching. No matter the structure of the co-taught class, all students should be viewed as ‘our students.’

—T. MARQUEZ / SPECIAL EDUCATION CO-TEACHER

The instructional framework: UDL, TPACK, and the AI copilot

Co-teaching strategies do not operate in a vacuum. They are most powerful when co-teachers bring them within a coherent instructional framework—one that accounts for the diversity of learners in modern classrooms and the technological landscape in which those classrooms exist. *Co-Teaching Evolved* organizes its instructional approach around two well-established frameworks and one emerging imperative.

UNIVERSAL DESIGN FOR LEARNING (UDL)

The UDL framework (CAST, 2011) provides the instructional why, what, and how of responsive teaching. It calls on teachers to create learning environments that offer multiple means of engagement, representation, and action and expression—ensuring that every learner can access and participate in meaningful learning experiences. Co-teaching naturally amplifies UDL: Two teachers working together can deliver UDL principles with a depth and responsiveness a single teacher cannot match.

When one co-teacher introduces a concept through direct instruction, and the other simultaneously builds visual supports and monitors student engagement on an interactive slideshow, both UDL and the graze-and-tag teaching strategy work together. When co-teachers split the class for parallel teaching with texts differentiated by complexity but unified in content, representation and engagement are both addressed. UDL and co-teaching are not parallel systems—they are mutually reinforcing (Murawski & Scott, 2017).

TECHNOLOGICAL PEDAGOGICAL CONTENT KNOWLEDGE (TPACK)

TPACK (Koehler & Mishra, 2009) describes the intersection of what teachers know about their content, their pedagogy, and their technology—and it is precisely at that intersection where effective instruction lives. In a co-teaching classroom, TPACK becomes a collective resource. One co-teacher may bring deep content knowledge while the other brings stronger technological fluency. Together, they can design lessons that neither could design as well on their own.

For example, in a secondary history class, one co-teacher might direct instruction on the causes of a historical conflict. At the same time, the other monitors student responses in a real-time interactive slideshow, identifies misconceptions as they emerge, and uses that data to differentiate the next segment of the lesson—all before the original teacher has moved on to the next topic. This is TPACK in motion, and it requires both partners to be actively engaged. When only one teacher is truly teaching, the TPACK benefit of co-teaching is lost (Rhoads & Karge, 2024).

GENERATIVE AI AS CO-TEACHING COPILOT(S)

Generative AI tools—including ChatGPT, Gemini, Claude, and others—are changing what is possible in co-teaching lesson design. When used deliberately, they function as a planning copilot: generating differentiated texts, creating varied formative assessments, drafting communication with families, scaffolding rubrics, and

producing content at multiple reading levels from a single source document. What once took a co-teaching team an entire planning period can now take minutes—freeing that time for higher-order work like discussing student data, refining instructional sequences, and strengthening the partnership (Rhoads & Karge, 2024).

Rhoads and Karge (2024) are clear that AI does not replace the human partnership at the center of co-teaching. Every AI-generated artifact requires

teacher review for accuracy, alignment with standards, and instructional appropriateness before it is used in lessons, learning management systems, or printed materials. The goal is not to automate co-teaching but to make it more sustainable—removing low-leverage tasks from teachers' plates so they can invest more deeply in the high-leverage work only human educators can do.

Co-teaching in classrooms without boundaries

One of the most significant shifts in co-teaching since Cook and Friend (1995) introduced their original model is the expansion of the classroom itself. Co-teaching now takes place in physical classrooms, digital spaces, blended environments, and hybrid configurations that combine both. Students in any given co-taught class may learn from different locations, on different devices, with different connectivity, and with different degrees of digital access. This is the “classroom without boundaries” that *Co-Teaching Evolved* addresses directly.

Instruction without boundaries requires co-teachers to be equally fluent in both physical and digital instructional environments. When one co-teacher leads a live discussion with students in the physical classroom and the other facilitates a breakout session with students participating remotely, both the partnership and the technology must be working seamlessly. When a co-teacher uses real-time formative assessment data from a digital tool to reorganize groups mid-lesson,

both TPACK and the alternative teaching strategy are in operation (Rhoads & Karge, 2024).

Co-teaching in these extended environments also requires actively maintaining equity. Digital access is not evenly distributed, and the risk of creating two-tiered learning experiences—one for in-person students and one for remote or hybrid students—is real. Effective co-teachers use their partnership to monitor equity continuously, checking not just whether students are engaged but whether they have the access, scaffolds, and support they need to learn at the same level regardless of where they are physically located.

The UDL framework is especially powerful in these contexts. When multiple means of engagement, representation, and action and expression are built into lesson design from the start, the accommodations that make learning accessible for some students become features that benefit all students—regardless of where they are learning from (CAST, 2011).

Cultivating a culture of co-teaching

Individual co-teaching partnerships are the unit of practice. But a school's co-teaching culture is the unit of sustainability. The most skilled co-teaching pair in a school cannot sustain their practice long-term without administrative support, protected planning time, coaching, and a shared schoolwide vision for what co-teaching should look like and why it matters. *Co-Teaching Evolved* dedicates its final chapter to this challenge precisely because it is where so many well-intentioned co-teaching initiatives break down.

WHAT SCHOOL LEADERS MUST PROVIDE

Rhoads and Karge (2024) are direct about what school and district leaders must do to create the conditions for co-teaching to thrive:

- **Intentional pairing:** Co-teaching partnerships should be built on complementary strengths, shared subject-area expertise where relevant, and teacher input—not administrative convenience. Haphazard pairings undermine partnerships before they begin.
- **Protected planning time:** Co-teaching without common planning time is coexisting, not co-teaching. Leaders must treat planning time as a nonnegotiable structural element embedded in the master schedule, not a scheduling luxury.
- **Ongoing professional learning:** One-day trainings are insufficient. Effective co-teaching requires a professional learning arc that begins before co-teachers enter the classroom together and continues through the year with coaching, observation, and collaborative inquiry cycles embedded in the PLC process (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, Mattos, & Muhammad, 2021).
- **Leader look-fors:** Administrators who observe co-taught classrooms need clear indicators of effective practice. In an effective co-taught classroom, both teachers are actively contributing to instruction, student groupings shift in response to evidence, and every student has equitable access to grade-level content and meaningful support.
- **Stakeholder communication:** Co-teaching must be explained to families. When parents understand the model, they become partners in the process. Without that understanding, they can become sources of skepticism that erode the program's sustainability.

THE COHERENCE FRAMEWORK FOR SUSTAINABLE CHANGE

Drawing on the coherence framework (Fullan & Quinn, 2016), Rhoads and Karge (2024) describe co-teaching culture change through four critical elements. **Focused direction** means all stakeholders share a common

LEADER LOOK-FOR

In an effective co-taught classroom, observers should see role clarity, student grouping that changes in response to evidence, equitable access to grade-level content and support, and both teachers contributing meaningfully to instruction—not one lead teacher and one permanent helper.

vision for co-teaching, with SMART goals that align the initiative to the school's broader equity and inclusion commitments. **Accountability** keeps the program on track through data review, maintained planning time, sustained co-teaching partnerships, and clearly defined co-teacher duties and responsibilities. **Collaborative cultures** build the buy-in and instructional risk-taking that allow co-teaching to deepen—through functioning teacher-driven PLCs, rotating professional development, and instructional coaching cycles. **Deepening learning** keeps the ultimate focus on students: building their

critical thinking, creative thinking, collaboration, and communication through purposeful, co-taught instruction (Fullan & Quinn, 2016).

Schools that approach co-teaching as a program—something they implement, complete, and move on from—rarely sustain meaningful change. Schools that approach it as a culture shift—an ongoing commitment to how they believe students learn best and to supporting teachers in making that learning possible—are the ones where co-teaching evolves (Rhoads & Karge, 2024).



Co-teaching is a harmonious partnership where educators blend their unique strengths, creating an enriched environment that not only fosters collaboration but also cultivates diverse learning experiences.

—M. LEFTWICH / CO-TEACHING EXPERT AND VICE PRESIDENT, 2TEACH GLOBAL

The path forward: From placement to partnership

The question driving *Co-Teaching Evolved* is deceptively simple: Are two adults in the room actually teaching together? In too many schools, the honest answer is no. Co-teachers are coexisting. One teaches, and one circulates. The specialist assists rather than instructs. The partnership never develops the shared language, essential agreements, or instructional depth to serve students well—and eventually, one or both teachers request a return to solo teaching.

This outcome is not inevitable. It is the predictable result of treating co-teaching as a logistics problem rather than a professional development priority. When schools invest in the conditions that allow co-teaching partnerships to develop—intentional pairing, protected planning time, structured professional learning, ongoing coaching, and a clear schoolwide vision—co-teaching delivers exactly what the research promises: stronger student outcomes, higher teacher efficacy, and more sustainable inclusive practices (Karge, 2023; Murawski & Lochner, 2018).

FIVE MOVES THAT TRANSFORM CO-TEACHING

For schools and districts ready to move from placement to partnership, *Co-Teaching Evolved* identifies five systemic moves that make the difference:

- **Define the purpose:** Frame co-teaching explicitly as a vehicle for equitable access to rigorous instruction—not as a special education service delivery model, not as a scheduling solution, but as the school’s primary mechanism for ensuring that every student receives responsive, high-quality teaching every day.
- **Pair and schedule with intention:** Build co-teaching partnerships deliberately, protect common planning time as a structural nonnegotiable, and balance rosters so that co-taught classrooms represent the school’s actual population rather than a concentration of students with the highest needs.
- **Create and honor essential agreements:** Give co-teaching pairs structured time before and during the school year to establish their essential agreements. Revisit these agreements at midyear and at the end of the year as part of a continuous reflection cycle.
- **Practice the progression:** Coach co-teaching teams to move deliberately from supportive to team to advanced strategies. Build PLCs or collaborative inquiry cycles around the eleven strategies, using student data to evaluate which strategies are producing the strongest outcomes for which students.



- **Build the culture:** Treat co-teaching as a schoolwide value, not a classroom-level experiment. Celebrate effective co-teaching partnerships. Share student outcome data that demonstrates co-teaching’s impact. Make the investment visible, and the investment will sustain itself.

The future of inclusive education does not rest on any single strategy, tool, or initiative. It rests on the quality of the partnerships between the educators who show up every day to teach—and on the systems schools build to support those partnerships. Co-teaching, when it evolves, is not a program. It is a professional culture. And it is one of the most powerful things a school can do for its students and its teachers alike.

How districts and schools can get started

Co-teaching becomes sustainable when leaders treat it as a system, not an assignment. These five moves help schools build the conditions for partnerships to thrive.

1	Define the purpose	Frame co-teaching as access to rigorous grade-level instruction for all learners—not simply a special education service delivery model.
2	Pair and schedule intentionally	Co-teaching lives or dies in the master schedule. Pair teachers thoughtfully, balance rosters, and protect shared planning time within the duty day.
3	Create essential agreements	Before instruction begins, teams should align on philosophy, routines, roles, grading and feedback, communication, and family contact.
4	Practice the progression	Supportive strategies are a starting point, not the destination. Coaching should help teams move into team and advanced strategies.
5	Use PLCs and data cycles	Co-teachers should plan, teach, assess, and reflect together—then choose the next strategy based on evidence of student learning.

About the Authors



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BELINDA DUNNICK KARGE, PhD, brings decades of scholarship and implementation expertise in co-teaching, inclusive practices, special education, and sustainable schoolwide systems. Dr. Karge has co-taught in both elementary and secondary education and served as an administrator supporting and mentoring co-teachers. She is a professor and longtime advocate for equitable instructional design.

Bring Dr. Rhoads and Dr. Karge to your school or district

KEYNOTES

- Professional development workshops
- Districtwide co-teaching implementation planning
- Leadership team coaching
- Book studies and facilitated learning communities

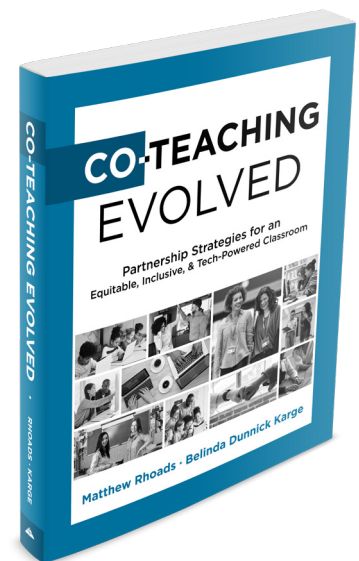
Get the book

As co-teaching becomes more commonplace, there is a need for change. This book walks educators through building relationships and creating an accord between co-teachers. Using a blend of research-based co-teaching strategies and cutting-edge instructional practices, teachers can learn to prepare their students to be lifelong learners in a dynamic world.



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